

A Tivoli Attraction: The Catholic Worker Farm in June of 1964

Historic Red Hook invites you to attend
“Gender, Religion and Rural Life:
Reconsidering Dorothy Day and the
Catholic Worker on the Land”
A talk by Sally Dwyer-McNulty
Sunday, Jan.13, 3-4:30 p.m.
Discussion and refreshments
Free and open to the public
The Elmendorph Inn, 7562 North
Broadway, Red Hook
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Editor’s Note: Through this regular series, the Dutchess County Historical Society, with guest authors from around the county, looks at our shared history. We hope you will see new things by looking at the old! To say Dutchess County has a rich, vital, relevant history is an understatement. If you are interested in learning more, go to www.DCHSNY.org/ddp or the web address in the profile of the author.

by Sally Dwyer-McNulty

I vote to bring back the guestbook. As a historian, there are few documents more enjoyable than a collection of names and descriptions of the people who visited a location of interest.

In my case, the destination was the Catholic Worker Farm in Tivoli, New York. Beginning in 1964, the Tivoli Farm kept a visitors log, and for a few of those years, it was peppered with bits of information about the guests. These shorthand notes offer a little local history as well as a sense of who the Catholic Worker’s friends and neighbors were in and beyond the Hudson Valley.

The Catholic Worker seems like a pretty specific organization name – they are Catholic, they are workers, and they are concerned with all workers. Most of that is accurate, but a little explanation would provide more clarity.

I’ll tackle the second word, “Worker,” first. The Catholic Worker looks closely at the lives of laborers. Do employers treat workers fairly? Are the wages earned adequate to support families? What are the conditions people work in and are they

safe? These are some of the questions that concerned Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, established in 1933.

The Catholic Workers also worked voluntarily. They provided food, shelter and support to those in need in New York City. Day and other Workers produced a newspaper, the Catholic Worker, to draw attention to their concerns about discrimination, working conditions, migrant labor and war, and to chronicle the people and efforts of the Worker. And, they maintained a philosophy of work – the idea that labor provides people with more than a paycheck; it offers a sense of purpose, community and self-worth.

The first word, “Catholic,” is more ambiguous. Dorothy Day, a convert to Catholicism, and Peter Maurin, a cradle Catholic, were indeed Catholic, as were most of their long-term members. But, they believed strongly in freedom and Day, in particular, identified herself as a pacifist and an anarchist. Therefore, while she was a devoted Catholic who attended daily mass, made regular retreats and observed Catholic devotions, she did not require other Workers to be Catholic.

As a result, people sometimes gravitated to the Catholic Worker for other reasons. Perhaps they found the Worker’s voluntary poverty attractive or maybe they were pacifists. The dignity with which Day and other Workers treated the people whom they fed and sheltered was another draw. Therefore, the Catholic Worker was full of Workers, but they weren’t necessarily Catholic.

The Tivoli guestbook in the Catholic Worker Collection at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin provides some indication of just how many different visitors were interested in collaborating with the Catholic Worker, enjoying their hospitality or simply satisfying their curiosity.

Here’s a sample of what the guestbook reveals in just a few weeks’ time. Worth noting is that it is common for archives to dedicate themselves to certain collections of which they become specialists. At Marquette, a researcher would find the records of the University, but they would also find other dedicated collections, one of which is the Catholic Worker Collection.



Children play at the Catholic Worker Farm pool – Tivoli, New York (1969). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University Libraries

By the 1970s, the Catholic Worker and its membership had moved well beyond New York, and therefore it wasn’t out of the ordinary when the decision was made to centralize the collection at Marquette.

But let me return to Tivoli, New York and the guestbook. Keep in mind that any primary source, like the Tivoli guestbook, is not a collection of facts. Every bit of information included has been filtered through the people writing in the book.

A visitor may have written their name, but not included all the people that accompanied them; a recorder may have provided a notation about a person that other observers would disagree with; the information may be all together wrong. Ideally, historians take all those possibilities into consideration when they look at a source. In this case, the guestbook gives us a glimpse, but not the full story.

So what does the guestbook have to say? I’ll give you a few examples just from June 1964.

One of the early guests was a local “organic farmer” and journalist Bruce Matthews of Tivoli. According to the note, he was gathering information for an article he was writing about the Catholic Worker for a paper in Barrytown. Matthews did indeed publish “Catholic Worker Movement Has New Home in Tivoli,” on July 16, 1964 in The Red Hook Advertiser. The guestbook put me on the lookout for an article and I found it.

Two professors, one from Purdue University and another, who had just finished up teaching at a Catholic university in Rio de Janeiro, came with their families. Between the two families, 10 children joined the farm for a stay – all age 10 and under!

Catholic Workers from New York City came up and brought more children from Harlem and Brooklyn. The children aren’t named, but the main attraction for the kids appears to be the pool.

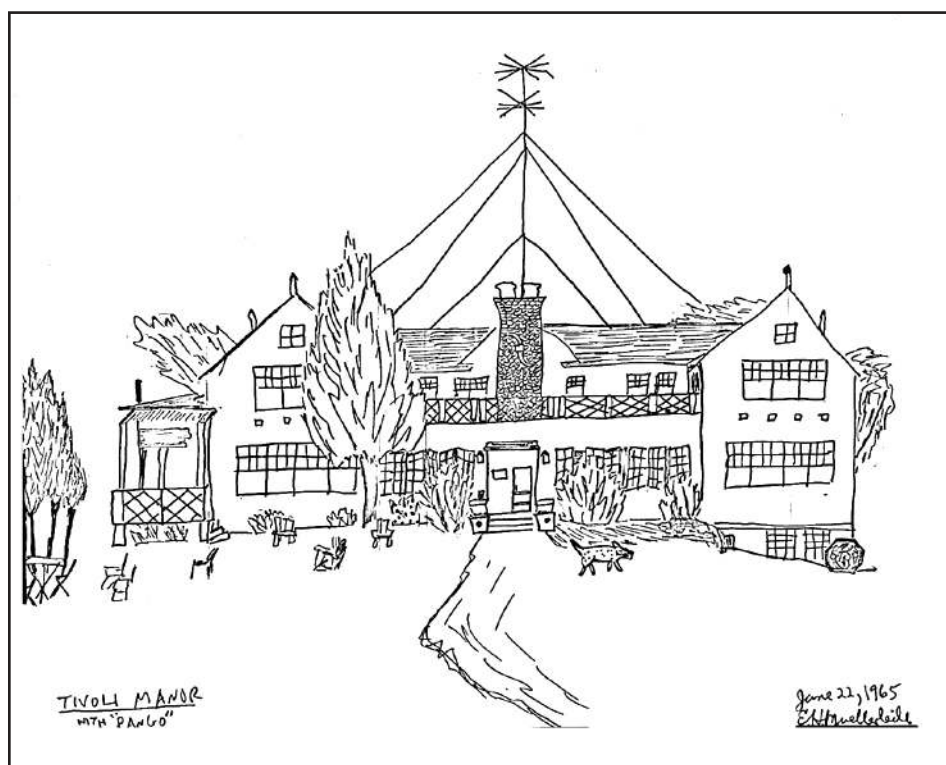
A few other visitors of note include Gerald C. Douglas. According to the record, he came as a representative of the Tivoli Recreation Committee. Douglas, the scribe wrote, was not only the Director of the Town Recreation Program, but the principal of the local school in Tivoli. Douglas requested that the Catholic Worker host a swimming program for the Tivoli Summer Program.

The guestbook included the note, “60 kids are coming 4 [groups] of 15 pupils each 1-5 pm at pool. Bus will bring little kids and ...come through the woods near the pool.” Historians like to highlight conflict, but in this case, we can see an example of almost immediate cooperation.

One of the next visitors is then the Tivoli Fire Department. The men, as recorded, filled the pool with “a thousand gallons of water” for the incoming swimmers.

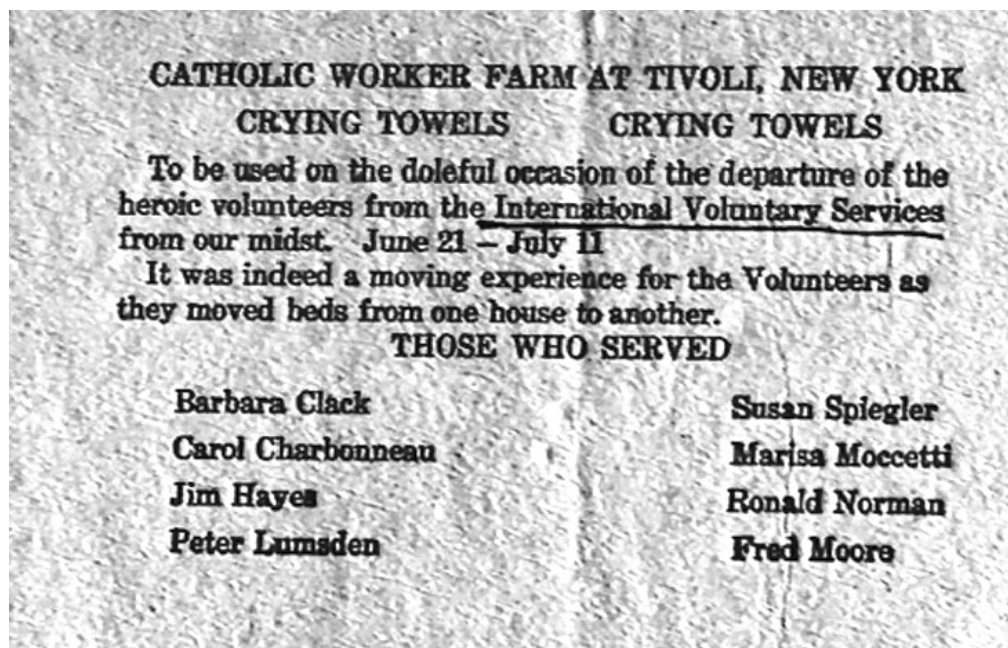
Members of an organization called the International Voluntary Service came for a stay, too. In the United States, the Peace Corps was just three years old (having started in 1961), but the IVS had been around in Europe since the early 1930s. Inspired by Pierre Céréssole and Hubert Parris, a Swiss and British Quaker, respectively, the organization dedicated itself to international service work and provided “alternative work” for European conscientious objectors during the Second World War. Members of the Mennonites and Church of the Brethren were instrumental in establishing an American IVS program in 1953.

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Sketch by E.H. Muellerleile, a priest from Minnesota. Catholic Worker Farm – Tivoli, New York (1965). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University Libraries

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"Crying Towel" – Tivoli, New York (c., 1964). Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections and University Archives, Marquette University Libraries

The IVS volunteers that came to Tivoli were from Chicago, Illinois's Hyde Park Peace Center. The notes in the guestbook indicate that the seven volunteers had a busy day of cleaning the school house and working in the garden.

It's unclear how long the IVS members stayed, but another bit of history found in the "Tivoli Ephemera and Miscellaneous, 1964-1976" folder within the Dorothy Day-Catholic Worker, Catholic Worker Farm (Tivoli, New York) Records, is a "crying towel" for the IVS members, 4 men and 4 women leaving the Catholic Worker. The towel suggests, among other interpretations, that the IVS members were highly regarded by their hosts and embarking on potentially dangerous work after their departure. The towels could have been printed up in fun, as well.

Judging from the guestbook, the Catholic Worker had indeed made a significant "splash" in the Tivoli community. Likewise, it attracted people from other parts of the country and world who were like-minded pacifists or just curious about the Movement. All this information came from just a few retained entries. If you ever get the opportunity to examine a historic guestbook, take your time and follow the trail. It can be a valuable tool for decoding the past.

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the author of *Common Threads: A Cultural History of Clothing in American Catholicism*, Chair of the June and Aaron Gillespie Forum, and a board member of Historic Red Hook.





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